

Mike Johnson

Director, Utah History Fair, 1991-2006

Mike Johnson came to work at the Utah History Fair in 1990, as assistant to then-director, Robert Parson. Mike completed an MS in History with a thesis entitled "Coal Smoke and Valve Oil: The Steam Era in Cache Valley Agriculture" while working at the Jensen Living Historical Farm. While at the Farm he restored and ran a Case steam tractor, serving as its engineer during the historic threshing celebrations. He developed the perfect combination of historical learning, enthusiasm for public history, experience in living history interpretation, and breadth of interest that led him to the Fair. In July of 1991 he became the full-time director of the Utah History Fair, running it from USU until cancer forced him to step down in 2006.

He loved travelling the state as History Fair director. He came to know every county in Utah, along with school superintendents and outstanding social studies teachers. Passionate about Utah's history, he took every opportunity to take the road less travelled, finding interesting historical associations everywhere. Mike was a back-roads kind of guy. All that travel made him a connoisseur of fast food, making the claim that all McDonalds were not created equally.

March is Regional Contest month in Utah, and Mike crisscrossed the state in his two-wheel drive Toyota truck. The Utah History Fair's event schedule demanded that he be on the road for events, usually two per week, in areas like Blanding, Price, St. George, Ephraim, Logan, Roosevelt, Salt Lake City, and Provo. Reaching Blanding from Mike's house in Hyrum usually took between six and seven hours.

Mike knew a little about a lot of things, and a lot about a few things. At a History Fair he was capable of engaging in discussions of nearly anything, including horse hobbles. He was a fine, even passionate local historian. He loved railroads, and when in Ogden he liked to get ice cream and go to the overpass on 24th Street, and listen the trains in the rail yard. He loved music, especially folksy songwriter stuff. Songs that made you laugh and think, and he blew passably good saxophone. He had a raucous laughter and razor-sharp wit.

Mike's dedication to building the History Fair paid off. Thousands of Utah students participated every year, and Utah always had a significant number of national winners at National History Day. Mike, with typical modesty, never bragged about how he facilitated the success of students and schools, but he came to embody the History Fair in Utah. His death from cancer in 2007 came as a blow to the history community in Utah.